

## BOOK REVIEWS

### China

PATRICIA BERGER. *Empire of Emptiness: Buddhist Art and Political Authority in Qing China*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003. viii, 266 pp. US\$45.00, hardcover.

This amply and beautifully illustrated volume is an important addition to the convincing new scholarship that insists that the “great” Manchu emperors be viewed not simply as consummate converts to Chinese high culture, but also as consummate imperial politicians with non-Chinese cultural interests of their own. Patricia Berger’s focus is on Hongli, the Qianlong emperor (who reigned 1735–96), as disciple of Tibetan Buddhism, as self-absorbed art patron and collector, and as master of a multiethnic empire. Her attitude towards Qianlong is largely sympathetic, which is troubling if one associates him with the summary beating to death of leaders of foot riots, or (as Philip Kuhn has shown) the widespread judicial torture that resulted from a court-led witch-hunt. The author nonetheless does scholarship a major service with her thoughtful exploration of the ideological, religious and political rationales reflected in the art and architecture that Qianlong commissioned.

Conventional Sinocentric wisdom expects Chinese Confucians to have served as a great emperor’s instructors and advisers. A constant theme in Berger’s book, however, is the role that the Tibetan Rolpay Dorje played as Qianlong’s spiritual and, on occasion, temporal adviser. Here, indeed, is Berger’s challenge: to take putative peripheries (a doubly non-Chinese religion, geographically frontier territories) and turn them into a new centre from which to view the realm of Qianlong’s Chinese cultural commitments. She begins by reading the imperialist symbolism of a multiculturally inspired painting, resplendent on the book’s dust jacket, of a court reception of submissive Mongol tribesmen at transmural Chengde in 1771. There follows a discussion of translation – of language, of images, and of identities (as with Qianlong’s assumed identity as the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī). Then come two chapters that address “the buildup of things in the Qing palace” (p. 11), from the cataloguing of Qianlong’s multifaith art collection to the extraordinary parades of tantric and other deities housed in special buildings in the palace compound. An exploration of the Qing imperial “culture of the copy” investigates political correction of past masterpieces by the palace imitators, while the concluding chapter probes the meaning of Qianlong’s encounter with the Sixth Panchen Lama, for whom the grandest quasi-replica of all (the Chengde copy of his home monastery) was built. The most interesting parts of the analysis, at least to this reader, are those that directly address the political significance of Qianlong’s self-inscription in his court’s artistic enterprises. This monarch, capable of ordering the use of tantric magic against enemies, stood to benefit politically from projections of his aura as a self-styled *cakravartin* (pp. 156–57).

and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan's works are just touched upon in the essay on the novelists of the 1930s and 1940s. Nevertheless, what is offered is substantial indeed. Individual chapters have been devoted to stalwarts like Raja Rammohan Roy, Kipling, Tagore, R. K. Narayan, Nirad Chaudhari, Naipaul and Rushdie; others consider together two authors such as Cornelia Sorabji and Sarojini Naidu, Gandhi and Nehru, while a large number of writers have been grouped together in overviews of trends in a particular period or genre.

Compared to the earlier attempts at recording history by single authors K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar and M. K. Naik, the present history significantly gains both in range and depth by offering contributions by scholars who specialise in different areas. Most of the 24 articles in the anthology are well researched and comprehensive in providing both factual information and a succinct critique of a particular author or genre. Diversity of narrative voices also lends variety to the tone and style of individual essays. The inclusion of archival matter, numerous illustrations and the absence of footnotes and critical jargon make reading a pleasure. Only a few articles such as Rajiv Patke's on 'Poetry since Independence' do a straightforward job of recording authors' major works and a few excerpts from them. Most of the articles, such as Bruce Carlisle Robertson's on Raja Rammohan Roy, Meenakshi Mukherjee's on 'The Beginnings of the Indian Novel', Peter Heehs' on Aurobindo, Suvir Kaul's on Naipaul, and Arshia Sattar's on 'Translations' are brilliant exercises in compression.

The book is particularly valuable for the information it provides on the nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, which is not easily accessible, and on relatively unknown authors like early prose writers Behramji Malabari and Govardhanram Tripathi. A select bibliography at the end of 'Further Reading' for each chapter adds to the value of the book. In subsequent editions a bibliography of the works referred to in individual articles could probably also be provided for the benefit of interested readers. The information on living authors would also need to be updated; for example, the essay on the Indian diaspora only lists works up to the mid-1990s.

Indeed an invaluable companion for any one embarking on a study of Indian literature in English, this history also offers substantial evidence that Indian literature in English has truly "arrived", despite the constant nagging by controversies of no consequence. It also demonstrates that, from the initial interface of colonialism and nationalism and instinctive bilingualism of its authors, it has moved to a cosmopolitan, global and multicultural texture due to the dispersed locations of Indians writing in English.

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RUSS and BLYTH CARPENTER. *The Blessings of Bhutan*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002. v, 186 pp. Colour plates, notes, glossary, index. US\$24.95, paper.

It is rare that one has the chance to review a book so inadequate that one is hard-pushed to find a positive word to write about it. *The Blessings of Bhutan* is, most unfortunately, such a book. One cannot imagine why University of Hawai'i Press, an otherwise reputable press that previously released the charming *Painter's Year in the Forests of Bhutan* by A. K. Hellum, has now published the Carpenters' recycled clichés and Orientalist imaginings.

The authors start out on a hapless tack "... visitors often feel altered by Bhutan ... their inner selves are stirred ... [and] many come home with a nagging feeling that they were at the edge of learning something important, something primary" (p. 1). With this

Conrad-esque backdrop in place, Russ and Blyth Carpenter enter the Heart of Lightness with their readers in tow. Their account of travelling and working in Bhutan is so personalised that those of us who have never visited their home in the USA wonder why they so frequently refer to it: “Bhutan reminds us of Vida, Oregon. Our hometown has a store . . .” (p. 7).

Their rambling anecdotes come across as impressionistic accounts from a journal, and are surely more suited to family archives or a Christmas letter home to friends than to publication as a monograph by an academic press. The authors trade in stereotype and are partial to a disparaging kind of anti-intellectualism, embodied by the statements: “only a masochist would want to know the names of all the languages spoken in Central and Eastern Bhutan” and “Bhutan’s geography changes from challenging to nearly hopeless” (p. 8). As if this were not disturbing enough, their hagiography of the kings of Bhutan as embodying “wisdom, strength, vision, and selfless behaviour” which they “daydream about the United States borrowing” (p. 9) is surely at odds with the sentence handed down by a previous king who had a citizen “whipped with peach branches until he convulsed and fell unconscious” (p. 18).

While this book has no scholarly pretensions, and readers would do better to travel to Bhutan with the *Lonely Planet* guidebook, the lack of engagement with issues that affect contemporary Bhutan, such as the activities of Indian rebels along the southern border or the plight of the Lhotsampa refugees (Bhutanese Hindus of Nepali origin) is simply negligent. In only one place are these issues touched upon, and then shrouded in euphemism and dodged in an amateurish and unconvincing way: “Many of the things we could say here about the southern problem would be out-of-date by the time this book is published” (p. 168).

In short, this book fails to deliver at all levels. The obvious delight the authors have in Bhutan is marred by their thinly disguised condescension: “in our view, the Bhutanese do not understand the insidious and destructive consequences of television” (p. 174) and platitudinous generalisations such as “we have no hesitations about the essential intellectual capability of the Bhutanese people” (p. 169). At best, perhaps the Carpenters could recycle their text for an in-flight magazine on Bhutan’s national airline.

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**ROBERT DESJARLAIS.** *Sensory Biographies: Lives and Deaths among Nepal’s Yolmo Buddhists*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003. x, 396 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. US\$21.95, paper.

In this elegant ethnography, the author explores the life histories of two ethnically Tibetan Buddhist elders from the Yolmo or Helambu valley of north-central Nepal. Borrowing the term “sensory biography” from C. Nadia Seremetakis’ study of Inner Mani, Greece, Robert Desjarlais weaves a careful and compelling narrative around the lives of Kisang Omu, a woman in her eighties, and Ghang Lama, a Buddhist priest. The author’s explicit aim is to “consider the ways in which certain culturally honed and politically charged sensory modalities have contributed to the making and telling of the[se] two lives” (p. 3), and the resultant success may be in large part due to the fact that he allows the protagonists to speak for themselves in their own words. When anthropological interpretation and analysis are overlaid, Desjarlais’ comments add insight and depth and avoid objectifying the lived experience.

Despite the small population of the people of Yolmo (they now number only several thousand), the worldviews of the two elders are particularly intriguing for the divergent

manners in which they reconcile themselves to their mortality and think about death. While Kisang Omu's orientation is acoustic, Ghang Lama is an unrepentant text-based visualist. As Desjarlais himself puts it, "one saw chiefly, . . . the other minded most the flow of words" (p. 3). With this focus on sensory exploration and recollection, *Sensory Biographies* is somewhat reminiscent of what the philosopher of visual media, John Berger, once referred to as "ways of seeing".

Overall, this is an interpretive, person-centred study that draws on recent comparative anthropological writings on how senses are affected by cultural dynamics in divergent societies, but which develops these ideas further to show how people's varying ways of sensing the world around them contribute to how they live their lives. While the ethnography is firmly rooted in the Himalayas, the book will be of interest to scholars and students of other areas in South and Central Asia on account of the author's engaging writing style.

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RUKMINI BHAYA NAIR (ed). *Translation, Text, and Theory*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2002. 348 pp. Rs540, hardcover.

*Translation, Text, and Theory*, though limited to an Indian context, makes a useful contribution to the discussion of translation. The text consists of five distinct and generally unrelated sections concerning cultural perspectives, historical contexts, pragmatic concerns, linguistic description, and philosophical issues.

The first three sections specify the kinds of constraints that frame the conditions of translating. As the editor notes in the Introduction, these three sections deal with the "how", "when", and "where" of translation. Individual essays range from discussions of postcolonialist stances to the politics of publishing and translation. In a way, most of these papers are really about the identity of the translator, and this is not surprising given the multilingual and multicultural context of India, where "code-switching" is a way of life in which phrases and words from several different languages may occur in a single utterance, so much so that no one ever seems to be speaking a single language.

While those essays in the first three parts reflect issues of multiculturalism, multilingualism and diaspora, those in the fourth section retreat from the ideas of identity, cultural constraint, historical horizons, and context. Instead of these particularising constraints the authors of these papers search for "computational models" of representation and control that broadly characterise "language behaviour" or formal features of lexis and linguistic structure. They emphasise "cognitive processes" that address the theoretical implications of the difference between "communicative" action and semantic representation.

The final section of this text is a useful reprise of some of the major "theories" of translation. In addition to discussions of Russian formalism, German "translation theory", deconstruction, speech act theory, and psychoanalytic theory, there is an interesting paper on the "ethics" of translation. "Ethics", here, is understood in terms of multiculturalism and the postmodern critique of meta-narratives. These ideas enable the possibility of non-hegemonic translation. The basic notion is that a translation is not a kind of "carrying-over" from one tradition or system of meaning to another in which one text dominates, either by semantic intransigence in the case of the original, or by colonisation in the case of the translation. The translation, then, is a kind of "between" that is neither a domesticated representation of the original nor an autonomous creation in the translator's language.